Airliner safety still a dud Lull in anti-missile readiness blasted

BY DEREK ROSE, DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

   It will be at least two years before any American airliners get the technology to detect and avoid terrorist missiles - a time frame that critics call unacceptable.

   The menace of shoulder-fired missiles - small enough to fit in a golf bag and lethal enough to knock a plane out of the sky - has haunted aviation experts since two were fired at an Israeli jet in Kenya last November.

   The industry's sensitivity to the threat was illustrated last month when an Israeli plane was diverted from Toronto after a caller threatened to shoot it down.

   Anti-missile technology is deployed on many military aircraft - and is believed to be in place on a few of Israel's El Al airplanes. But Homeland Security officials say they need at least two years of testing before they will
be ready to deploy it on commercial airliners.

   "This is the most glaring vulnerability to commercial aviation, it is a catastrophe waiting to happen," said Rep. Steve Israel (D-L.I.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee. He has unsuccessfully pushed for a $10 billion bill to equip the nation's 6,800 commercial planes with missile countermeasures.

   As for cost, he said earlier this year: "Quite honestly, the $1 million-per-plane cost that would have to be absorbed on a $50 [million] to $100 million plane is not economically devastating."

   Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) criticized the two-year timetable. "We know that terrorists have thousands of these weapons," he said.

   The Department of Homeland Security said it plans to spend $100 million over the next two years evaluating and testing anti-missile technology for commercial aircraft.

   The financially struggling airline industry says it backs the plan to use taxpayer funds and the administration's timetable..

   "Before embarking on the deployment of anti-missile defense systems, which are estimated to cost as much as $100 billion in taxpayer money, the administration is prudently advocating careful study of the effectiveness of

this untested technology and the exploration of alternative solutions," said James May, president and CEO of the Air Transport Association.

Defense contractors have offered three proposals that would protect commercial jets.

Raytheon suggests equipping planes with Doppler radar to detect threats and installing hundreds of tiny aluminum wafers that rust on contact with air, giving off heat to distract a missile's heat sensors. The cost: $600,000 to $700,000 a plane.

Northrop Grumman wants to outfit aircraft with lasers that would disrupt a rocket's guidance system, for $1 million or $2 million a plane.

"We're not burning anything or blowing anything up," said company official Jack Pledger.

Called the Nemesis system, the countermeasures are used on military C-17 aircraft and can lock onto a target in seconds, Pledger said. But the laser turret might affect flight characteristics, requiring testing for each plane
model.

Defense company ATK has teamed with United Airlines for a proposal that uses fast-burning flares to draw incoming missiles away from a plane. The system is already used to protect military cargo planes, said spokesman Bryce Hallowell. The system costs $500,000 a plane and weighs just 30 pounds, he said.